

Demystifying the Process of Engaging with the Disability Service in Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper reflects upon a recent collaboration between students and staff on the Creative and Therapeutic Arts degree and the Disability Service at the University of South Wales, where students raised concerns about challenges in accessing specialist support for their learning. As is commonly noted on creative courses, a relatively high percentage of students on this degree identify as experiencing additional or specific learning needs. As part of a pastoral support initiative, it was recognised that a high percentage of students were eager to engage with the Disability Service but perceived that they had experienced difficulties in doing so. By establishing monthly meetings between the Course Leader and the Manager of the Disability Service, and consulting student records with students' full consent, it emerged that there was a significant misunderstanding between students, academic staff and support staff about the process of engaging with the Disability Service and securing specialist support. The collaboration between students, Course Leader and Service Manager unearthed that, as well as differing perceptions of disability, there was a significant lack of accessible guidance for engaging with this process, echoing the Welsh Assembly Government's findings that complexity was a barrier to engagement with such provision nationally (Welsh Assembly Government, 2017). As a result, an accessible infographic was created to guide students and staff through the complex process of engaging with the Disability Service to secure specialist support. The intention is that this resource will support students, academic staff, support staff and colleagues in other departments to understand the process involved in accessing specialist support and thus support students in this important journey.

Keywords: Disability, Inclusion, Higher Education, Ableism, Support, Specific Learning Difficulties

Introduction

This paper reflects on a collaboration between students and staff on the Creative and Therapeutic Arts degree and the University of South Wales' Disability Service. The degree programme teaches students about models of disability (Goodley, 2017), inclusive practice (Fox and Macpherson, 2015; Baglieri and Shapiro, 2017), arts in health (Fancourt, 2017) and arts for wellbeing (Clift and Camic, 2016); nurturing practitioners who are passionate advocates of authentic participation and creative expression. Students facilitate creative arts workshops in their local communities throughout their studies, with a focus on wellbeing. As is common of both therapeutic and creative courses (Alden and Pollock, 2011; Tobias-Green, 2014), this programme attracts a high percentage of students who experience specific or additional learning needs. Many of the students are able to relate to the participants they work alongside in meaningful ways because of their own experiences of specific or additional learning needs.

Despite the critical disability studies lens through which the curriculum is taught, there has been little historical relationship between the Course Team and the Disability Service. Students routinely engage with the service, but as is common and deemed appropriate by the Disability Service, Course Teams aren't necessarily involved in this process. While this separation is advocated by the Disability Service to enable students to access support confidentially, should they choose, Liaison (2014, p. 124) proposes that this separation further embeds exclusionary regimes: 'These practices are antithetical to the principles of an inclusive discourse that is geared towards the necessity of responding to learner diversity without having recourse to segregating and stigmatising forms of provision'. Kirby (2009) reflects further on the division between neurodiverse students and their peers and suggests that this model 'removes the need for institutional culture change and the removal of barriers through the adoption of inclusive practice' (Kirby, 2009, p. 75).

Osborne and Fogarty (2014, p. 59) take the discussion further to suggest that there can be 'delight to be found in non-standard approaches, that there is significant value in the interdependency of disability, and perhaps of greatest interest to designers, that disability can be a creative and generative force'. This assertion advocates for the learning potential of engaging with diversity.

Through the implementation of a Personal Academic Coaching (PAC) initiative at the university (USW CELT, 2018), the division between academic, pastoral and specialist support was diminished slightly through transparent discussions with students at regular intervals. Through this closer working relationship, it came to the Course Team's attention that of the high percentage of students who identified as experiencing specific or additional learning needs, few of them were successfully engaging with specialist support, with many students reporting perceived difficulties in engaging with the Disability Service. This was the foundation of this collaborative project, which sought to understand these experiences and to resolve the students' confusion and frustration around accessing support for their learning needs.

The Impetus for the Collaboration: Student Voice

Through engagement with a new pastoral support scheme at the university, academic staff took on the role of Year Tutors and liaised with every student in their cohort once per term. The intention of the scheme was to understand the student experience more closely and namely to signpost increasingly effectively to any student services that students may benefit from: either in supporting their learning or in enhancing their employability. This Personal Academic Coaching (PAC) initiative was part of the Student Experience Plan and was intended to 'join the dots of different aspects of [students'] chosen course and intended profession, monitoring regularly and aiding their academic progress, catching any other issues they have and referring them to appropriate support in Student Advice or Careers... enhanc[ing] their student experience, but also aid[ing] engagement and retention' (USW CELT, 2018).

While the Creative and Therapeutic Arts team had always provided a robust tutorial model for students, the rigour of an allocated tutor and scheduled termly meetings enabled deeper monitoring of student experience, leading to recognition of an emerging pattern. This pattern illustrated that a relatively high number of students perceived a challenge in accessing the Disability Service, a service which they believed might benefit their learning.

The percentage of Higher Education students disclosing a disability has steadily increased over recent years (Kirby, 2009; Madaus, 2012; Kendall, 2016), with a 24% increase of students with a known disability status in Wales between 2012 and 2017,

equating to 13% of the HE student population in Wales in 2017 (HESA, 2018). These statistics represent students who choose to share or 'disclose' their disability.

Vickerman and Blundell (2010) and Redpath *et al.* (2013) suggest that it is possible that many more students identify as disabled but choose not to share or 'disclose' this experience, for fear of affecting the application process or any associated stigma perpetuated by a primarily ableist, medical model understanding of disability in academia (Moore and Slee, 2012; Knott and Taylor, 2014; Bolt and Penketh, 2017). The term 'disclose' encapsulates this ongoing interpretation of disability as a defect or flaw (Madriaga *et al.*, 2011). Kerschbaum, Eisenman and Jones (2017, p. 2) discuss in detail the 'deeply rhetorical nature of disclosure... emphasising disability disclosure as a complex calculus in which degrees of perceptibility are dependent on contexts, types of interactions that are unfolding, interlocutors' long- and short- term goals, disabilities and disability experiences, and many other contingencies'. The complexity of disclosure is beyond the scope of this article, but is worthy of deeper exploration.

While the aforementioned statistics demonstrate that disabled students are still underrepresented in Higher Education in general (Gibson, 2012), students with specific learning difficulties are in the majority on the Creative and Therapeutic Arts degree programme, as is common for creative subject areas (Woolf, 2001; Tobias-Green, 2014). Another contradiction is that while some literature suggests Disability Services are largely underutilised by disabled students (Hong, 2015; Abreu *et al.*, 2016), students on this programme were eagerly and proactively trying to engage with support. Further research is required to understand whether there is any correlation between the subject matter taught around critical disability studies and inclusive practice and students' engagement with their learning needs and disabled identity (Pickard, 2018).

The prevalence of students in all years of study identifying as having a specific learning difficulty and facing challenges in accessing the Disability Service led to an initial enquiry with the Manager of the Disability Service to understand what could be leading to this perceived lack of necessary support. Upon reflection, the initial assumption was that there may be a backlog of students requesting support at the beginning of a new term; that there may be issues with levels of staffing in the department; or that there may have been challenges in securing necessary evidence

of diagnoses to secure specialist provision. Due to these potentially inaccurate assumptions, early meetings reflected a clash of culture and understanding between the Disability Service Manager and Course Leader. Both parties were eager to support students, in the students' best interests, but shared a different understanding of the system and potentially held a subtly distinct definition of disability at the heart of the conversation.

Disability as a Social or Medical Construct

It was interesting to understand through discussions with the Disability Service Manager that students couldn't be referred to as 'disabled', according to the service, until they had received a diagnosis. This was very contentious with the approach to inclusive practice on the Creative and Therapeutic Arts degree, where strides are made to move away from a medical model interpretation of disability towards increasingly social model and affirmative perspectives (Mallett and Runswick-Cole, 2014; Goodley, 2017). Further, this medicalised perspective negates the notion of the student as expert in their own experience, and relies on professionals to verify, justify and legitimise students' needs. This approach can focus on the student's 'defects' as opposed to challenging barriers created by the institution's ableist culture (Kirby, 2009; Brown and Leigh, 2018). The Course Team recognised that students were notably disabled by the curriculum, system and space on a regular basis, and there was a strong motivation to challenge and address this. Ownership was taken by the team for some of these disabling barriers, and engagement with increasingly inclusive curriculum design is continually researched to address this (Grace and Gravestock, 2009; HEA, 2011; UDLL, 2016). However it was also recognised that within the current Higher Education climate and discourse, specialist provision is necessary for some students.

It is possible that there was also tension between the constructs of 'special educational needs' and 'disability', which aren't necessarily synonymous (Lewis *et al.*, 2010), a perspective which 'necessitates the removal of disabling barriers by means of problematising and modifying existing organisational attitudes, processes and practices that exclude certain individuals from mainstream cultures and communities' (Liasidou, 2014, p. 122).

Financial burden was a further barrier to support at the time of this collaboration, with some students required to finance a diagnostic assessment to engage with specialist support. Several students found this barrier insurmountable, and it is extremely positive to note that the university has since revised this process and is able to fund and administer the necessary assessments internally without cost to the student.

Further, some students had existing diagnoses but the specific nature or source of the diagnosis didn't meet the criteria of funding providers and thus, despite accepting and receiving support for their diagnosed learning needs for several years, students were required to access diagnostic testing anew, a potentially distressing and expensive experience (Kirby, 2009; Sparks and Lovett., 2014).

This is by no means intended to be a criticism of the Disability Service, who are a highly skilled and compassionate team. The legal, systemic and financial reasons for maintaining clear boundaries on who can access specialist provision are understood. Kirby (2009) provides insightful commentary into the multifaceted roles and identities of a Disability Service in Higher Education, taking the roles of 'procurer', 'advocate/activist' and 'adjudicator/verifier'. Reflecting some of the tensions noted above, Kirby (2009, p. 79) recognises that the 'policies, procedures and systems, which these services work through, are often at odds with promoting inclusion and maintaining the students' voice and the core of the educational experience'.

Despite the contrasting perspectives on disability and the various complex processes at play dictating which students were eligible to engage with the service, it was clear that there were students who may well meet the necessary diagnostic criteria, who, for a variety of reasons, weren't accessing the specialist support they were potentially entitled to, and this in itself was perceived as disabling by the students.

Meeting in the Middle

Having taken some time to understand the true scale and scope of the situation, and having reflected on the challenges of supporting students with specific learning difficulties and/or additional learning needs in Higher Education, consideration was given to what small steps could be explored in this pilot collaboration to enable students and staff to understand and engage with this important process more constructively.

The outcome of engaging with the Disability Service effectively can be incredibly valuable to students, potentially making students more likely to complete their studies successfully and making a significant positive impact on overall performance (Welsh Assembly Government, 2017). However, this model still perpetuates a medicalised, deficit-based interpretation of disability and relies on the academy making what it deems a 'reasonable adjustment' to its provision (Equality Act, 2010). Transforming the systemic approach to diversity and disability is a significant but vital endeavour (Bolt and Penketh, 2017) and while beyond the scope of this initial pilot collaboration, this is a vital area to further challenge. As Guillaume (2011; cited in Liasidou, 2014, p. 123) asserts, the phraseology of 'reasonable adjustments' 'portrays disability as an individual problem rather than a systemic problem that results from power inequities and discriminatory regimes'.

While the longer term ambition is to 'remove barriers for disabled students at an institutional level, in all aspects of mainstream planning' (Kirby, 2009, p. 80), in seeking to provide tangible and immediate solutions for students and staff affected, initial steps were taken to support students and staff in understanding the existing process more effectively. In recognising the complexity of the process as a barrier to initial engagement, an accessible, visual infographic was developed, outlining the six key steps involved in engaging with the Disability Service at the university.

A Potential Solution: An Accessible Infographic

It was understood that students felt they were taking a big step in reaching out for support and making initial contact with the Disability Service. Students felt that after making an appointment and attending this initial meeting, they had overcome the most challenging hurdle and were eager to receive support as a result. However, Disability Service staff had a more detailed understanding of the process and recognised that this first step, while important, was only the initial stage of engaging with the service and in isolation was unlikely to lead to support being implemented.

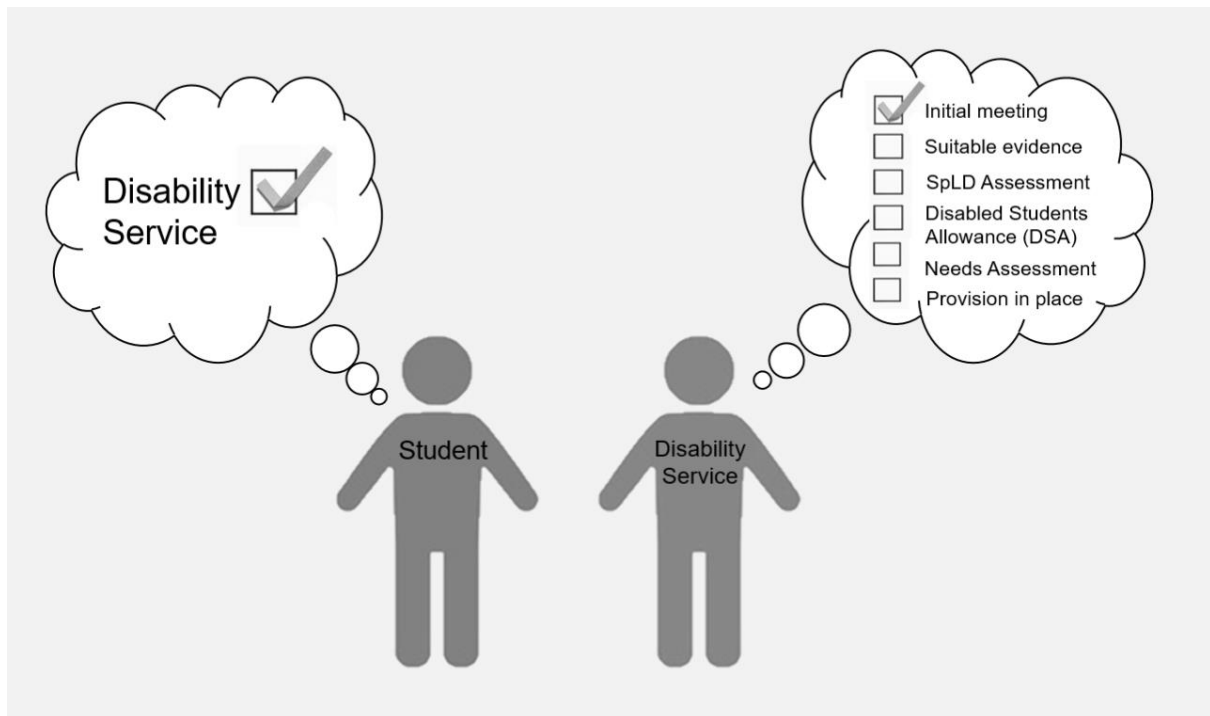


Figure 1 – Illustration of the disparity between students' perception of the process of engaging with the Disability Service and the Disability Service Adviser's perception

It transpired there was a misunderstanding of progress made and necessary next steps for securing specialist provision through the Disability Service. On the one hand, this misunderstanding was that of the student, who, due to the complexity of the process and the reliance on processing complicated written information presenting a barrier to engagement, wasn't aware that they were required to act further. On the other hand, there was also a lack of follow up on behalf of the Disability Service, who were expecting the student, who had already outlined that they felt that they required support in processing complex information, to make further communication or take further steps in the complicated process. The fragmented and overly complex nature of this process is recognised by the Welsh Assembly Government in their recent evaluation, where it is noted that the current system 'places too great an onus on the student to navigate themselves through [the system]' with 'the application form itself... a barrier to many students' (Welsh Assembly Government, 2017, p. 3).

While the Welsh Assembly Government report goes on to discuss challenges in acquiring funding, needs assessments, time scales and assessors' understanding of contexts; consultation of students' records with their explicit permission highlighted

that students hadn't even progressed to the initial stages of the journey to accessing specialist support. This is therefore a further challenge not identified in the Welsh Assembly Government evaluation, and is potentially more of an organisational challenge. Further research is necessary to understand how other Higher Education institutions articulate the process to students.

In an attempt to address this disparity of expectation and understanding around Disability Service support and subsequent receipt of specialist provision, an accessible infographic was developed in order to demystify the process and presents the necessary stages in an accessible format to all parties. This infographic took the shape of a road to symbolise the journey students would take in engaging with the service and to represent the necessary stops along the way to reaching the desired destination. On reflection, the analogy of a road or journey is an interesting one, which conjured up some further metaphors in the later consultation stages.

In developing the Infographic, the Course Leader and Disability Service Manager were eager not to deter students by emphasising the complexity of the process, but were also passionate about creating a useful and realistic tool for engaging with the service. As such all the necessary information was included in a clear and visually accessible format. Funding from the Faculty Learning and Teaching Committee enabled collaboration with a Graphic Designer to develop the infographic in a professional, aesthetically pleasing way.

As the authority in the process of engaging with the service, the Manager of the Disability Service presented what she perceived to be the six key steps in securing specialist support. Having established the six key steps, consideration was given to what information was essential and useful, and what information might merely complicate students' engagement. It was decided that a document that could be used digitally and in print would be valuable, so web links were included either to click electronically, or to photograph or write down if the document was seen in print. The document was developed to be printed at A2 size in poster format as well as in A4 print as a handout, and thus graphics which worked well at this scale were created. A first draft was created and crucially circulated for consultation with key stakeholders.

Stakeholders included students who had successfully engaged with the Disability Service and been through the six steps; Disability Service Advisers who support students in engaging with the six steps; colleagues in associated departments who's provision is referenced e.g. Student Development and Study Skills; academic colleagues who have engaged with Disability Service support in the past; academic colleagues with no experience of engaging with the Disability Service; Faculty Learning and Teaching Committee; and Student Voice Representatives, who may or may not have engaged with the Disability Service.

Signposting to other services was considered important in order to emphasise which services were complementary and which shouldn't be considered a replacement for one another. Historically, there has been some frustration when students who identify as experiencing specific learning needs approach the Study Skills service hoping to receive specialist support, when the remit of the service is quite distinct to that of the Disability Service. Managing student expectations is very important to overall student experience and by ensuring that students were confident with which services they could access regardless of learning needs or diagnosis, it was hoped that students would more confidently engage in appropriate services to support relevant learning needs.

Colleagues and students also provided guidance on fonts, spacing, layout and accessibility of the design and format. This was further developed in the second draft, where background colours were adjusted to support learners with dyslexia and fonts were adjusted both for ease of reading and access to screen readers.

Stakeholders who had less experience of engaging with the Disability Service in the past were surprised at the detail involved in the process and found the infographic a constructive format for educating them in this. Stakeholders who were heavily involved in the process of providing specialist support commented that there should have been a resource like this many years ago and questioned why in fact there hadn't been. This was an interesting reflection, and posed the question as to how students overcame the complexity of the process in the past, and what proportion of students may not have accessed specialist support due to this barrier of complication and misunderstanding.

An interesting observation came from the group of Student Voice Representatives. It isn't known whether this group of students had personally engaged with the Disability Service. Their comments were that the analogy of the road should include speed bumps or traffic lights to emphasise the waiting or potential delays that they perceived were an inherent part of the process: 'Some felt that [without these bumps or traffic lights] it may give students the impression that it was an easy journey to negotiate' (Student Voice Representative feedback).

This was particularly insightful feedback – either about the known experience of the service being about waiting or delays, or about the expectation that such a process would or should take a long time. While there certainly are bumps in the road, and many students report challenges in accessing support due to financial or diagnostic challenges (Sparks and Lovett, 2014; Welsh Assembly Government, 2017); the intention of the infographic was to emphasise the possibility of engaging with specialist support and what this could offer students to enhance their learning experience.

As the Student Voice Representatives made a valid point, and potentially one drawn from personal experience, traffic lights were chosen to illustrate the necessary stages of progression from one step to the next. For example the light might be at red until documentation is collated to evidence diagnosis; or might be on amber while funding is agreed but detail of appropriate provision is arranged; or might change to green when the student completes and returns the necessary Disabled Students Allowances (DSA) forms.

Further research is necessary to understand whether the Student Voice Representatives' comments were based on lived experience of bumps in the road in accessing Disability Service support, or were assumptions that such a process would or should take a long time for disabled students.

Further to the traffic lights, some statistics were added which represent the potential benefit to students of engaging in this process: 'Most students (over four fifths) agreed that the DSAs support had made a significant positive impact on their overall performance' (Welsh Assembly Government, 2017, p. 52). In addition, an anonymised student quotation from a student who had engaged successfully with the Disability Service was incorporated:

‘Last year, I really struggled with the workload but the support of my Disability Service tutor has really helped. I feel that engaging with the Disability Service support has really helped me with my academic work. I would thoroughly recommend promoting the service for those who are struggling’ (Anonymised Student Quotation taken from USW Disability Service Infographic).

It is hoped that these additions give a balanced and realistic overview of the challenges and benefits of engaging with this specialist provision.

Once final changes and revisions were incorporated, the infographic was launched and shared at the university’s annual Learning and Teaching Conference (Pickard and Norris, 2018). The infographic was also published on the university’s internal home page and circulated to through key colleagues across faculties. It is intended that this resource will be utilised with future applicants through Enquiries and Admissions, students as they enrol through Student Administration, during engagement with the Disability Service, at year tutor meetings and academic tutorials with academics and for information through a range of services such as the Advice Zone, Study Skills and Marketing.

Initial feedback has been resoundingly positive, with disabled staff commenting on the utility of the resource, as well as students negotiating the process for the first time.

Conclusion

Engaging in this pilot collaboration was a very insightful and informative experience which provided a different vantage point on inclusive practice within the university. While the Disability Service are rightly seen as the authority on disability provision, it was surprising to understand such a medical model underpinning the provision and process, and to realise that the vast number of students who didn’t qualify for accessing the service would need to find alternative means of engaging with their learning needs. Again, this isn’t intended as a criticism of the Disability Service in any sense, but is rather an important realisation that academic staff need to take much further responsibility for developing the accessibility of their provision (Liasidou, 2014).

If principles of universal design for learning (UDLL, 2016) were more widely engaged with, there might be less reliance upon specialist support (Griful-Freixenet *et al.*, 2017; Bedrossian, 2018). There will inevitably be students who are on the threshold of requiring specialist support and if they are unable to receive that support, there needs to be a deeper consideration by academic staff of their learning experience. While in primary and secondary education it is much more likely that an educator would have access to very specific guidance on the learning needs of a pupil and strategies for enabling their meaningful participation, in Higher Education it appears that this level of detail is much less possible to acquire (Mortimore and Crozler, 2006; Kendall, 2016). Some students may not choose to disclose their learning needs, while others may not be aware of them. As such, there is much more responsibility upon academic staff to ensure that their provision is as widely accessible as possible (De Bie and Brown, 2017), ensuring that those who do not access specialist support can still access the education for which they have paid and subscribed.

Some academics describe this as a shift away from a normative, ableist discourse in academia (Moore and Slee, 2012; Bolt and Penketh, 2017; Brown and Leigh, 2018), advocating that the notion of 'reasonable adjustment' only serves to perpetuate an interpretation of disability as deficit. While other authors take a social justice approach (Valenzuela, 2007; Gibson, 2012; Liasidou, 2014), encouraging educators to consider the socio-cultural processes at play in their educational environments.

The next project between the Creative and Therapeutic Arts degree and the Disability Service proposes to develop a system whereby students can share the notes they take during lectures with their cohort. It is hoped that this will be a valuable opportunity for students to experience in practice some of the principles of universal design for learning they are encouraged to employ in their creative arts workshops. It will however be vital to learn from the experiences of students in understanding if this mechanism is constructive or meaningful (Griful-Freixenet *et al.*, 2017).

In designing the initiative, there was a clear desire to move away from the hierarchy of the expert and the student in need, and thus a model is proposed whereby students are given training in a range of note taking methods and styles but

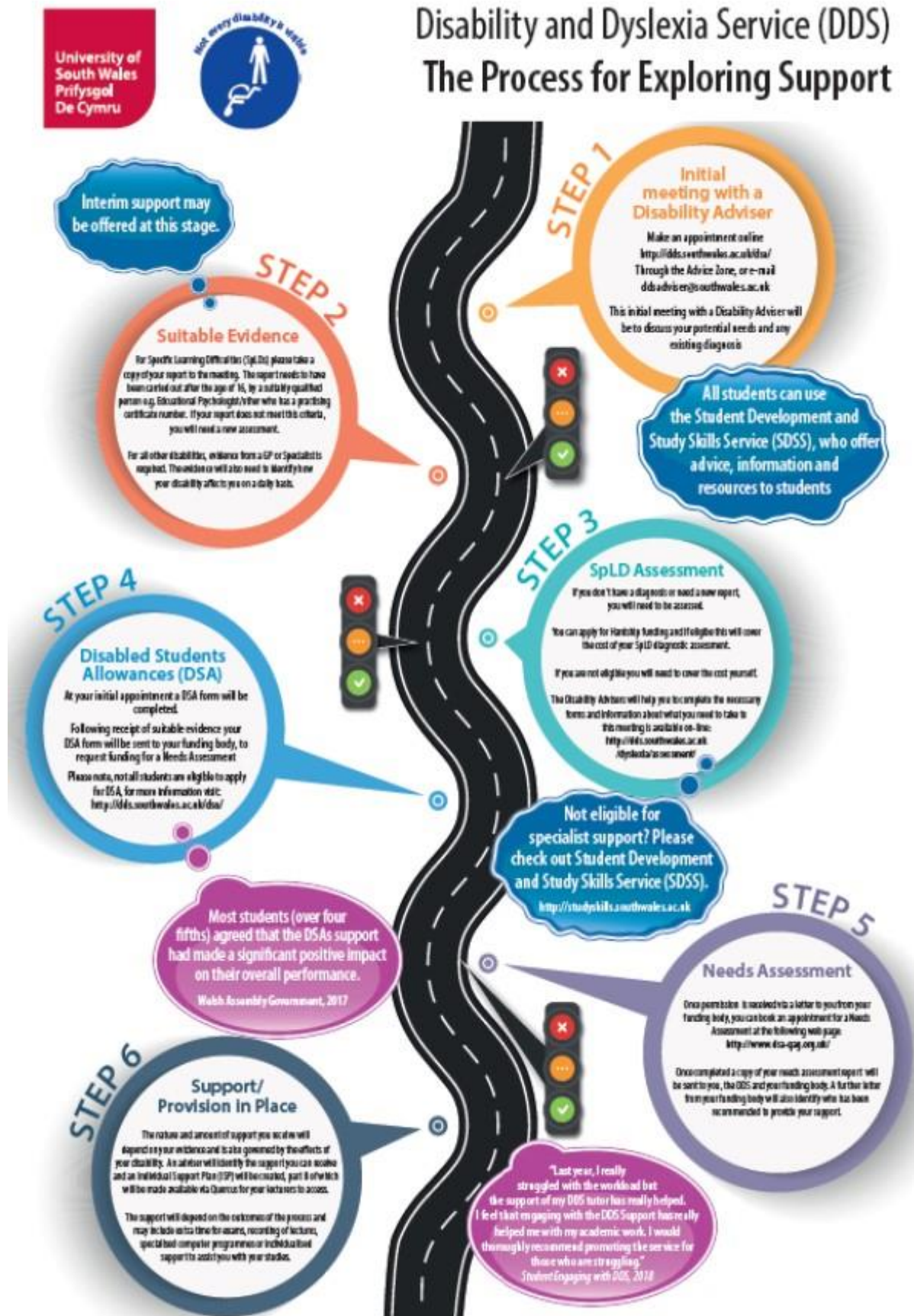
encouraged to upload their diverse and rich examples to support each other's and their own development. In this way, a highly academic 'read-write' learner can benefit from engaging with the cartoons drawn by their peer who has Autism, or a student who has dyslexia and has difficulty writing their own notes while attending to the lecturer simultaneously can revisit the written notes of a peer, read aloud by software accessible to all through the university.

This is a small-scale pilot embedded within one module of the programme initially, to understand student perspectives towards the initiative, and whether the quality of the notes taken meet the needs of learners. This project is by no means intended to discredit or make redundant the vital work of the Disability Service and specialist support, but is hoped to provide constructive interim support in the first term of study.

While Taylor, Baskett and Wren (2010) advocate that support from the outset is imperative for disabled students, and Kendall (2016) reports that this is so in her case study, this is unfortunately rarely the case at this university. There is often a tension between pending Disability Service support in the first term and immersive learning agendas when students without access to necessary support are expected to complete early assessments. It is hoped that this proactive model of sharing resources and expertise will address this shortfall in the first term, and may develop a community of learning between students. This will also be an authentic opportunity to understand the potential of inclusive practice and universal design for learning: emphasising to students through experiential learning the sociocultural dimensions of inclusive practice in addition to logistical and practical considerations (Valenzuela, 2007; Gibson, 2012).

A vital response to this pilot project will be to engage much further in principles of inclusive practice and universal design for learning in Higher Education, in order to limit the segregation of disabled students to specialist services and to ensure a parity of experience for all learners.

Appendix 1: The Process for Exploring Support



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